

## Real Gold in *On Golden Pond*

*The film, a surprise hit, yields Oscars for Fonda and Hepburn*

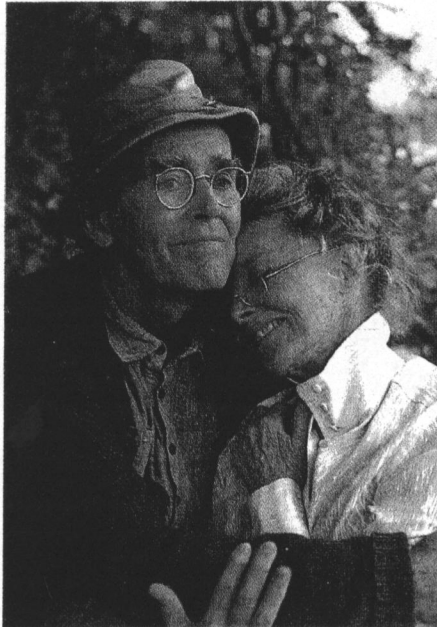
It was an extraordinary time in a very ordinary ceremony. Within a few short minutes, two stars in their 70s beat off the young and the beautiful to win two of Hollywood's most prestigious prizes, Academy Awards for Best Actor and Best Actress. But then Henry Fonda and Katharine Hepburn are not just old folks, and *On Golden Pond*, the film that carried them to victory (see *TIME* cover, Nov. 16), is not just a movie. It is one of those rare and phenomenal successes that surprise everybody—including their makers. Admits Co-Producer Jane Fonda: "I thought it would be a respectable film, but not a big commercial success."

Much the same might be said about the evening's other surprise winner, *Chariots of Fire*. Named the year's best picture over such rivals as Warren Beatty's epic *Reds* and Louis Malle's fascinating *Atlantic City*, *Chariots* was also a sentimental favorite, an exhilarating tale of two British runners in the 1924 Olympics. Though Beatty won the award for Best Director, the night clearly belonged to the little, inexpensive movies and, most particularly, to *On Golden Pond*.

In many ways the history of the film is as inspiring as its plot, illustrating the rewards of devotion and tenacity. Written by Actor Ernest Thompson, *Golden Pond* debuted as an off-Broadway play in September 1978. Transferred to Broadway in March 1979, it did mediocre business and lasted only through June. Then something unusual happened. Three new producers resuscitated the play a few months later, and it remained on Broadway until the spring of 1980. It still did not catch on, however. When the two Broadway runs finally ended, the total loss was about \$290,000.

Some plays are not made for New York, and *On Golden Pond* is one of them. "It's a lovely heartland play," says Arthur Cantor, one of the original producers. "West of Westchester, it apparently can't miss." Despite its failure on Broadway, it has become a favorite on the regional and summer-stock circuit. The original backers' investment of \$240,000 was paid off last August; an average of \$25,000 in royalties still comes in to the author every month from performances all over the world; and Cantor expects at least 10,000 amateur productions before that deep pond is finally drained.

All of which does not count the movie receipts, which are expected to reach \$80 million to \$85 million



Two old pros together at last

some time this week, and may eventually go as high as \$150 million. Now playing in 1,200 theaters in the U.S. and Canada, the film is also doing well in other countries. "It is confounding all the cynics," says Director Mark Rydell. "What it all says is that the public is asking for good material."

Even Thompson, who also won a screenwriting Oscar for adapting his play, is a little nonplused. "The reason the

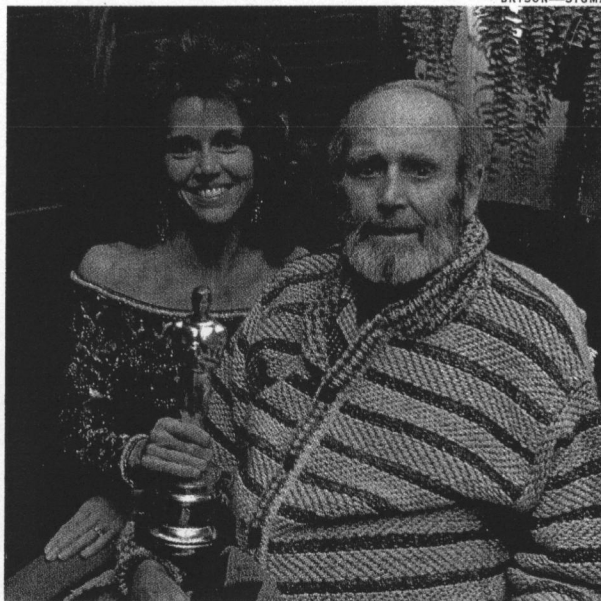
movie is such a big success is because the kids are going," he says. "I stuck my head in the theater a few nights ago and it was filled with eleven-year-olds. Why? Who knows?" Thompson, who is only 32 himself, does offer an explanation for the story's appeal, and his answer is doubtless the right one: "There is tremendous love in the film. It is about imperfect people loving each other. The Henry Fonda character is a real bastard when you get down to it, but Hepburn puts up with him anyway. Everyone wants someone like that—to put up with him until he dies."

For the real Henry Fonda, who is suffering from a severe heart ailment, *On Golden Pond* was the next best thing to a cure. Despite having given some of Hollywood's finest performances of the past 50 years—in such films as *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Twelve Angry Men* and *Mister Roberts*—Fonda had never won an Oscar. When *Golden Pond* was completed, his wife Shirlee used the prospect of that little statuette as medicine. "I made it an unrelieved mind trip," she says. "I told him that he was going to win, and wouldn't that be wonderful after so long a time waiting for it. Talking about the Oscar was another way of not letting him fade away. When he won, I flew into his arms. He held me tight and I saw the tears in his eyes, and they told me he was overwhelmed with a sense of profound happiness. 'Hell, if I hadn't won,' he said, 'I wouldn't have been able to walk with my head up any more.'"

Hepburn, who had already won three Oscars, was astonished—and delighted—to receive a fourth. On tour in Washington with Thompson's newest play, *The West Side Waltz*, she turned off her phone and slept through the ceremonies, certain she would lose. When she heard the news the next morning, she says, "I was dumbfounded. I'm so touched that my fellow actors cared to vote for me, a dear old thing." She adds: "These days you are goddamned lucky if you get a good part."

Simple or sentimental, the responses to the 1981 Academy Awards proved that even in a crass and fickle realm like Hollywood, one certitude endures: audiences, including show-biz insiders, still love to be moved and to have their spirits lifted.

—By Gerald Clarke.  
Reported by Dean Brells/New York and Martha Smilgis/Los Angeles



Father and daughter posing with the family's new addition

Confounding cynics and going on an unrelieved mind trip.



Writer Thompson

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